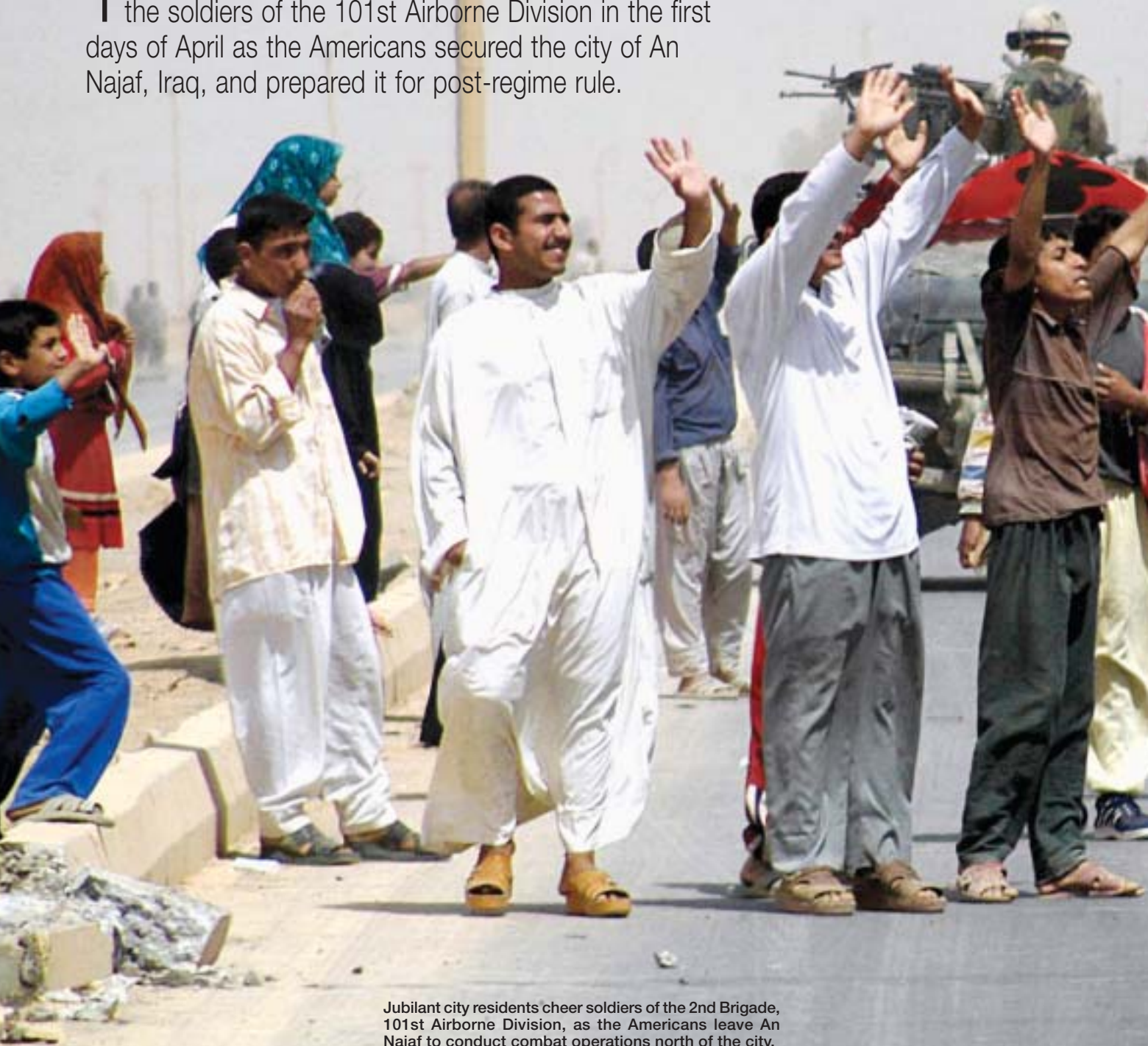


Freeing Najaf

Story by PFC James Matise

THE smiles and cheers of liberated Iraqis greeted the soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division in the first days of April as the Americans secured the city of An Najaf, Iraq, and prepared it for post-regime rule.



Jubilant city residents cheer soldiers of the 2nd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, as the Americans leave An Najaf to conduct combat operations north of the city.



“FROM the Iraqi people to the soldiers of freedom and peace, we wish you every happiness,” read the inscription on an autographed Arabic-language Bible that one Iraqi presented to PFC Eric Tanner, a paralegal assigned to Headquarters and Hqs. Company of the division’s 1st Brigade.

“I was pulling security on a convoy, and this man came up to me and gave me the Bible. He spoke really good English,” Tanner

PFC James Matise is assigned to the 101st Airborne Division, currently in Iraq.

said. “We talked for about two hours. He didn’t want anything from us, he just wanted to talk and say ‘thank you.’”

Their discussion ranged from family to the similarities of Christianity and Islam, to visions of an Iraq free of Ba’ath Party tyranny.

As Saddam Hussein’s regime crumbled before the coalition forces’ attack, the local people were quick to show their gratitude to the soldiers who’d freed them, Tanner said.

“It was an outstanding reception,” said PFC Frank Chelkonas, another 101st Abn. Div. soldier. “We’ve gotten to talk to people who barely understand English, and they



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Soldiers inspected abandoned houses suspected of containing information on the regime's uniforms, discarded bottles of antibiotics and a copy of a Ba'ath Party membership

accept us with open arms. They're looking for a change, and they're going to get it."

The enemy forces within Najaf were under intense bombing and shelling for about four days, Chelkonas said, and quickly surrendered when U.S. forces assaulted the town.

"Since then, we've been sending out patrols every morning and assisting special forces soldiers in seizing munitions," Chelkonas said. "I expected some pretty fierce resistance, but we encountered almost none."

Najaf has long been considered an important coalition objective, with both strategic and political value. It is a key crossing point over the Euphrates River, and is considered a holy city by the nation's Shiite Muslim majority. Winning the support of Iraq's Shiites was important to defeating the Iraqi army and ensuring the future

stability of post-Saddam Iraq, Chelkonas said. So far, winning the hearts and minds of the people seems likely, especially considering the city's former military presence.

On April 3, in a public move to declare the city's liberation, the division blew up a 30-foot-tall statue of Saddam Hussein. For days, as the wreckage of the statue lay broken around its prominent base, Iraqis drove by and honked their horns at the soldiers.

"Good, good, good," one man yelled from his vehicle as he passed the broken statue.

"The people asked us if we'd freed them, and if we're their saviors," SGT Lujan Williams said. "They're really nice people. They thanked us every day."

The citizens of Najaf initially found themselves without running water or power, because both had

been knocked out during the fighting, but the locals were able to repair both utilities within days of the city's liberation. Meantime, the U.S. soldiers secured the area to ensure the people remained safe while they collected water.

"Initially, we helped distribute water, but now the operation runs smoothly without our help," said MAJ Brian Winski, executive officer for the 1st Bn., 237th Inf. "Water and food don't seem to be a huge issue. Our main concern is getting the power and civil infrastructure up — to get basic health and human services in place."

Though the Ba'ath Party militants had lost control of the city, they'd left behind weapons and other materials that had to be removed before local authorities could assume control.

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COL Frederick B. Hodges, the 1st Bde. commander, told his troops to take the sacks of rice and whatever utensils they could find out to the streets for the people. "We'll call it the first phase of humanitarian assistance," Hodges said.

Soldiers also inspected an abandoned technical university that had been seized by 2nd Bn., 502nd Inf. Inside each building were dozens of metalworking machines and components for more than 1,000 antipersonnel land mines. Drawn on a blackboard was a blueprint for their assembly.

Days after U.S. forces took the city, residents returned to work. Traffic

began to flow and buses operated. Residents took their livestock to market, and shopkeepers opened their stores. The skeletons of destroyed vehicles were cleared away, and the images of Saddam Hussein began to come down.

Military legal teams surveyed the areas captured by coalition forces and began processing damage claims. Where possible, local contractors will be hired to repair damages and the claims will be settled with money captured from the Ba'ath Party, Tanner said.

As commerce flowed again and the people began to lift themselves out of a regime-induced poverty, there was a marked difference of opinion of the western world between now and what had been portrayed under Saddam's oppressive propaganda machine, Tanner said. "America?" some of the Iraqis said. "We love America." 🇺🇸

1 A soldier from the 422nd Civil Affairs Battalion helps deliver a bag of rice in a village near the city. The rice was provided by an international relief agency through the Army.

2 As smoke billows from a building demolished by U.S. forces, residents feel secure enough to begin taking to the streets again.

3 On April 7 more than 3,000 rifles, including hundreds of AK-47s, were discovered and rounded up by the 101st's 1st Brigade. The weapons were later destroyed by a bulldozer and left as rubble.

4 One week after liberating the city, soldiers of 1st Brigade search a house suspected of containing evidence of the Ba'ath Party regime's chemical and biological programs.

5 CPT Ryan Morgan, the commander of the 101st's Company C, 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment, holds a rocket-propelled grenade found with nearly 4,000 pounds of munitions. The division found tons of enemy weapons and destroyed them.